

# How to Read the Word of God More Accurately



**Thrust statement:** **Everyone must strive to read the word of God Accurately.**

**Scripture Reading:** **2 Timothy 2:15**

Like any growth, development may be healthy or it may be malignant; discerning the difference between these two kinds of growth requires constant research into the pathology of traditions. But it is healthy development that keeps a tradition both out of the cancer ward and out of the fossil museum.<sup>[1]</sup>

In the nineteenth century, Friedrich Schleiermacher originated the idea of the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle philosophy simply means: “Each part of a text must be interpreted with reference to the whole; yet the meaning of the whole cannot be grasped without considering the parts.”<sup>[2]</sup> Interpretation is an attempt to understand the work as a whole by an analysis of its elements.<sup>[3]</sup> Hermeneutics<sup>[4]</sup> ordinarily covers the whole field of interpretation, including exegesis.<sup>[5]</sup> Nevertheless, hermeneutics is often used in a much narrower sense to grasp the relevance of ancient works. In other words, it is concerned about the “here” and “now.”<sup>[6]</sup> L. Berkhof makes the following succinct observation:

The *necessity* of the study of hermeneutics follows from several considerations:

- (1) Sin darkened the understanding of man, and still exercises a pernicious influence on his conscious mental life. Therefore, special efforts must be made to guard against error.
- (2) Men differ from one another in many ways that naturally cause them to drift apart mentally. They differ, for instance,
  - (a) in intellectual capacity, aesthetic taste, and moral quality resulting in a lack of spiritual affinity:
  - (b) in intellectual attainment, some being educated, and others

uneducated; and

(c) in nationality, with a corresponding difference in language, forms of thought, customs, and morals.<sup>[7]</sup>

Hayes and Holiday define exegesis as an attempt “to reach an informed understanding of the text.”<sup>[8]</sup> It is possible for an interpreter to miss the point of the text if he or she does not consider the “linguistic, cultural, and historical background to the inspired writings,” writes Cedric Johnson.<sup>[9]</sup> It is also in this vein that Berkhof cautions Christians not to fall into the same trap that many fell into during the Reformation. Berkhof again sharpens the focus of caution:

The militant spirit of the age found expression in hundreds of polemical writings. Each one sought to defend his own opinion with an appeal to Scripture. *Exegesis became the handmaid of dogmatics, and degenerated into a mere search for proof-texts.* The Scriptures were studied in order to find there the truths that were embodied in the Confessions.<sup>[10]</sup>

To set the tone for this discussion, perhaps it would be helpful to review the experiences of numerous individuals within the Stone/Campbell Restoration Movement. Many within this Movement encounter long-held traditions in his/her quest to understand the Word of God in its context.<sup>[11]</sup> It is not uncommon for Christians to identify the traditions of their “interpretative community” with the Word itself. Johnson expresses the basic problem well in his discussion of presuppositions:

Generations of scholars in the field of hermeneutics have recognized the influence of preunderstanding on interpretation. C. S. Lewis observed that “what we learn from experience depends on the kind of philosophy we bring to experience.”<sup>[12]</sup>

Untold numbers with whom I have discussed the science of exposition have shared their frustrations and have described their Christian journeys as “Gullible’s Travels.”<sup>[13]</sup> Christians often accept what they are taught without question. It is in this sense that their interpretation is neither subjective nor objective. In other words, they have never taken the time to employ their minds subjectively in analyzing the Scripture for themselves, nor have they looked at the Scriptures objectively. Their interpretations are “ready-made or prefabricated meanings.”<sup>[14]</sup> Their interpretations are hand-me-downs from their interpretative community. Again, Fish rightly says, “In other words interpretive <sup>[15]</sup> communities are no more stable than texts because interpretive strategies are not natural or universal, but learned.”<sup>[16]</sup> In spite of Fish’s deconstruction philosophy, nevertheless, he is correct when he writes:

And, moreover, the way of seeing, whatever it was, would never be individual or idiosyncratic, since its source would always be the institutional structure of which the “see-er” was an extending agent. This is what Sacks means when he says that a culture fills brains “so that they are alike in fine detail”; it fills them so that no one’s interpretive acts are exclusively his own but fall to him by

virtue of his position in some socially organized environment and are therefore always shared and public.<sup>[17]</sup>

Leaders, especially ministers within the Churches of Christ, often memorize verses from the Bible by the hundreds. But their interpretation frequently is not so much theirs, as it is the interpretation of a social structure to which they belong; that is to say, their interpretative community. Traditions still stand in the way of listening anew to the Biblical text.<sup>[18]</sup> Once more, the Gonzalezs' caution: "We must learn to reevaluate and reinterpret what has been handed down to us."<sup>[19]</sup> It is still very difficult for individuals to conceive that one might cite Scripture and, at the same time, fail to apply the text correctly in light of its historical background.

Some religious writers within the Churches of Christ suppose they have all the answers. And as a result of this kind of intellectualization, the intellectually correct party ostracizes those who go against the grain with their particular interpretative community. To justify condemnation over against the so-called nonconformist, then **Matthew 7: 15** is cited: "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."

One must be careful that one does not go to the Scriptures to prove what one already believes, but rather to see what they say. Many are so accustomed to reading the Bible as previously taught by generations of interpreters that they cannot distinguish between interpretation and revelation. In other words, for one to question the traditional interpretations is tantamount to questioning the Word of God itself.<sup>[20]</sup> This failure to discriminate between explanation and divine inspiration is one of the main obstacles that believers encounter in their efforts to liberate the Bible from its culture and to maintain unity among God's people. The heritage of explaining is confused with the text itself. The faith of the fathers becomes the watchword for orthodoxy; the interpretation of the fathers becomes normative and is passed on as authoritative.

One of the most difficult obstacles for any Christian is to approach the text without any strong personal biases. Studying the Bible with colored glasses ultimately leads to distortion of the text.<sup>[21]</sup> People often tend to give preconceived beliefs the same authority as they give to the Bible. In other words, one's preconceived political power is equal to that of the Scriptures. One's own personal journey of faith, with the ghosts of the past, makes it very difficult for one to view the Scriptures without prejudice. One's prior understanding and interpretation makes it difficult to sift out the truths of God in dealing with the text.<sup>[22]</sup> The culture of one's heritage controls the text of the Bible. One should never forget that one's own journey occurs within a vast architecture of preunderstanding—no thinking takes place in a vacuum. Frederic W. Farrar draws attention to the religious hatred that generates from this know-it-all attitude:

My opinions are founded on interpretations of Scripture. Scripture is infallible. My views of its meaning are infallible too. Your opinions and inferences differ from mine; therefore you must be in the wrong. All wrong opinions are capable of so many ramifications that any one who differs from me in minor points must be unsound in vital matters also. Therefore all who differ from me and my clique are "heretics." All heresy is wicked; all heretics are necessarily wicked

men. It is my religious duty to hate, calumniate and abuse you.<sup>[23]</sup>

## CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION

The first step in explaining Scripture is to read the text. To fathom a passage involves the immediate context, the remote context, and the larger context. The *immediate context* includes verses preceding and following the reference that one is studying. On the other hand, the *remote context* may take in the entire book in which the text is found. Also, the *larger context* may embrace the whole of God's written revelation. This understanding of contexts helps to determine the meaning or meanings that one attaches to any distinct phrase. Otherwise, the interpreter may impose conjectured convictions on a text without due reflection upon what the author says. Without a conception of a context, a person's particular context tends to shape his/her understanding and interpretation of the message. Sidney Greidanus is correct when he says, "An interpreter must be careful not to read more into a text than is actually there at that particular stage of redemptive history."<sup>[24]</sup>

Merely reciting Scriptures that draw attention to certain party dogmas is not sufficient to determine the meaning of the text. Remember that the context is the determining factor in trying to arrive at a correct insight. One must not employ Holy Scripture in a way the Holy Spirit did not employ them. Leroy Garrett points out with justification that

People tire of our equating our understanding of the word of God with the word of God itself. This is to say that we must distinguish between revelation and interpretation. Revelation is what God has given us in scripture. Interpretation is what we conclude the scriptures to mean. One is divine, the other human.<sup>[25]</sup>

One may cite **Matthew 7:15**—"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves"—correctly, but not necessarily speak *as* the Bible speaks. One may speak *where* the Bible speaks and not speak *as* the Bible speaks. In order to understand this passage of Scripture, it is necessary to study the whole of Matthew's Gospel before analyzing individual elements.

### A BASIC PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION: VIEW OF THE WHOLE VERSUS THE PARTICULAR

As one contemplates a study of the whole of Matthew's Gospel, it is imperative that one examines the full text before an analysis of its parts (for example, **Matthew 7:15**). If a reader explores a specific verse without weighing its sum total, then one's reflection may radically alter a correct view of a particular text. Examples of particularization of texts without contexts to support certain dogmatic presuppositions are rampant among many Christians. We may consider the following isolated Scriptures as examples of frequently cited texts that are misapplied by many sincere Christians to uphold a sectarian spirit that divides the Christian community for which Jesus prayed (**John 17**).

- Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves (**Matthew 7:15**).

- Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it (7:13-14).<sup>[26]</sup>
- If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell (5:29-30).
- But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also (5:39).
- Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you (7:1-2).<sup>[27]</sup>

It is not uncommon for interpreters to impose their own conceptual grids on a text without due reflection. When one approaches the Word of God, one should approach with a hermeneutics of suspicion. In other words, one should be conscious of his/her own fallibility in interpreting Scriptures. One's interpretation should always remain the object of suspicion and of critical evaluation. Everyone must have a self-critical stance toward the tendency to impose one's own agenda upon the exposition of Scripture. This is especially true in the above Scripture citations (Matthew 7:15; 24:11, 24).

For many believers, false prophets (7:15) are those who disagree with their brand of orthodoxy or interpretation of Scripture. Also, many appeal to the Scripture (7:13-14) about the small gate and the narrow road to give credence to their particular denominational stance as the only way to heaven. Some Christians have even taken the self-mutilation language (5:29-30) as a call to physical impairment of the body. Among the one-cup and non-Sunday school movement, the turning of the right cheek (5:39) is cited as justification for not defending one's country in the time of war.

One cannot necessarily just take the Scriptures at face value without seeking to understand the intent of the author. Everyone is to employ sound methods of interpretation in seeking to unfold the intended meaning of any text. One needs to develop the habit of working with the text in order to hear what the original hearers heard. Hopefully, this study will assist one's understanding of the original setting in order to help remove twentieth century bifocals and journey back into the first century, to stand upon their threshold, to see through their eyes, and to think their thoughts. God's people must seek to read the Bible without colored glasses, which often leads to distortions; one must guard against his/her interpretation as equal to that of Scripture. To accomplish these objectives, it is necessary to learn how to read the Gospel of Matthew.

### General Overview of the Gospel of Matthew

Matthew's Gospel is remembered for its Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, and the Golden Rule. The Gospel of Matthew is cherished for its union of gospel and ethics, of

faith and morality. Matthew's Gospel is concerned to recover the moral and ethical aspects of the Christian life, something that the Old Testament prophets also sought to capture. Matthew speaks against those who set themselves over against the ethical instructions of Jesus. For Matthew, it is not sufficient just to accept Jesus as the Messiah,

but one must obey Him. This is what the Sermon on the Mount is all about—ethical behavior that is pleasing to God.

In fact, Matthew includes the stern warning of Jesus against those who do not obey God: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (7:21). Then, Matthew also concludes his Gospel with Jesus’ admonition to His apostles to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (28:19-20). Thus, Matthew begins and ends the ministry of Jesus with a call to correct conduct.

### The Gospel's Structure

This essay has chosen **Matthew 7:15** an example of how to read the word of God more accurately. For one to interpret any Scripture correctly, one should consider the structure of the book before dealing with its parts. This is especially true for a correct interpretation of **Matthew 7:15**. The following structure of Matthew's gospel should assist individuals in their understanding and application of the parts to the Christian community today. Before one adventures into the narrative studies of the three major divisions of Matthew's gospel (**1:1—4:16; 4:17—16:20; 16:21—28:20**), an analysis of the five major discourses in the Gospel of Matthew should help one in the identification of the false prophets of Jesus' time as well as the time of Matthew's writing this Gospel. The Gospel of Matthew appears to be written around five major discourses.

- The Sermon on the Mount (**5:1—8:1**)
- The Charge to the Apostles (**chapter 10**)
- The Parables (chapter 13)
- The Lesson on Forgiveness (**chapter 18**)
- The Judgment and End of Jerusalem (**chapters 24—25**)

Following the five discourses, Matthew gives a transition that concludes each major discourse:

- “When Jesus had finished saying these things” (**7:28**)
- “After Jesus had finished instructing” (**11:1**)
- “When Jesus had finished these parables” (**13:53**)



- “When Jesus had finished saying these things” (19:1)
- “When Jesus had finished saying all these things” (26:1)

Matthew’s Gospel can further be divided into ten sections in which “doing” and “teaching” alternate.

NARRATIVE	TEACHING	TRANSITION
1—4	5—7	7:28
8:1—9:34	9:35—10:42	11:1
11:2—12:50	13:1—52	13:53
13:53—17:27	18:1—35	19:1
19:1—23:39	24:1—25:46	26:1
26:1—28:20		
Passion Week		

Matthew portrays Jesus as *doer* and *teacher*. He records at least twenty miracles and six major messages. Approximately sixty percent of Matthew’s Gospel focuses on the teachings of Jesus. It is also significant that he arranges his material in a topical, rather than a chronological order. For instance, he groups ten miracles together in **chapters 8—9**. The above outline helps one to look at the discourses in context in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of the conflict that existed between Jesus and the Pharisees.

## CONCLUSION

This article has sought to make interpreters conscious of how prior understanding can affect one’s current understanding of Scripture. All Christians who open God’s Word and read it bring with them the forestructures of their lives formed by their history, their language, and their culture in which they live, therefore it is imperative upon every reader to capture the original intent of the author. Since no one can approach the text without presuppositions, then one must exercise every safeguard to interpret the Word of God correctly.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 60.

<sup>[2]</sup> Kathleen Morner and Ralph Rausch, “Hermeneutics,” *NTC’s Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Illinois: NTC Publishing Group, 1991), 97. This essay applies the hermeneutic circle in order to identify the false prophets in the Gospel of Matthew.

<sup>[3]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[4]</sup> See Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 17, where Stein writes: “The term ‘hermeneutics,’ . . .

. simply describes the practice or discipline of interpretation; Thomas H. Olbright, *Hearing God's Voice* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1996), 185, where he says, "In a large sense, hermeneutics constitutes a theory about how one person explains or communicates a text to another."

[5] See Morner and Rausch, "Exegesis," Ibid., 72,73, where they say, "Originally, the detailed analysis, explanation, and INTERPRETATION of passages in the Bible, or, by extension, of any literary or intellectual text. The term carries with it a sense of digging out the meaning of a difficult passage."

[6] See Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 25.

[7] L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), 12.

[8] John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook, Revised Edition* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1987), 23..

[9] Cedric B. Johnson, *The Psychology of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 20. See Appendix V, Dallas Burdette, "Passover Traditions in the First Century," for an example of the application of the above principles—"linguistic, cultural, and historical background."

[10] Berkhof, *Interpretation*, 28-29.

[11] See Hayes and Holladay, *Exegesis*, 66, where they write:

The best guide to the meaning of a word is the context in which it is used. This means, first of all, the immediate context of the passage in which it occurs. If a word has several meanings, one should explore the range of meanings and see how they fit or do not fit in the context. A broader context is the whole of the document in which the terms appear. One should explore how a term is used and what it denotes elsewhere in the document.

[12] Johnson, *Interpretation*, 45.

[13] See Dallas Burdette, "My Pilgrimage of Faith," in which I develop the evolution of my thinking in my Christian journey. This article is informative in that I discuss basic principles of how to interpret. This essay discusses many of the "pit falls" that I encountered on my spiritual journey as a boy preacher. To a great extent, my earlier spiritual journey could be described as "Gullible's Travels" [ON-LINE]. Available from [www.freedominchrist.net](http://www.freedominchrist.net) [accessed 28 April 2000] located under BIBLICAL STUDIES.

[14] Stanley Fish, *Is There A Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980), 172.



[15] Fish does not use “interpretative community” but “interpretive community.”

[16] Ibid. I disagree with Fish’s philosophy of the text being unstable. If I understand Fish correctly, he is a deconstructionist in his philosophy. See Morner and Rausch, “Deconstructive Criticism,” *NTC’s Dictionary*, 50-51, where they explain “deconstruction”:

An approach to LITERARY CRITICISM based on the views and procedures of the French thinker Jacques Derrida. Deconstructive criticism utilizes reader-centered theories of meaning that ignore reference to the author’s intention and deny the possibility of a terminate meaning or “correct” interpretation for any text. Deconstructive criticism makes possible innumerable contradictory but “undecidable” meanings. First becoming prominent in the 1970s, deconstructive criticism is central to POST-STRUCTURALISM.

[17] Ibid., 335.

[18] See Justo L. Gonzalez and Catherine G. Gonzalez, *Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 48-68.

[19] Ibid., 31.

[20] For an insightful article on the differentiation between Revelation and interpretation, see Leroy Garrett, “It Means What It Says,” *Restoration Review* 17, no. 4 (April 1975) : 68-71.

[21] See Johnson, *Interpretation* , 42, where he captures, in concise language, the subjective biases of all interpreters:

My contention is that conflicting theological positions are in part due to the fact that we all approach a text, sacred or secular, with our strong subjective biases. Even though we have a commitment to read the Bible on its own terms: and even though we want the Divine and human authors to speak for themselves, somehow we still come up with contradictory views on some issues.

[22] For an excellent presentation of this concept, see Gonzalez and Gonzalez, “Difficulties in Hearing the Text,” in *Preaching*, 29-47.

[23] Frederick W. Farrar, “Religious Hatred,” quoted in Carl Ketcherside, *Mission Messenger* 27, no. 6 (June 1965): 92.

[24] Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 71.

[25] Garrett, “It Means What It Says,” 69.

[26] See Dallas Burdette, “The Narrow Gate” for a contextual study of **Matthew**

**7:13-14** [ON-LINE]. Available from [www.freedominchrist.net](http://www.freedominchrist.net) [accessed 28 April 2000], located under caption BIBLICAL STUDIES.

<sup>[27]</sup> See Dallas Burdette, “Judge Not” for a contextual study of **Matthew 7:1-2** [ON-LINE]. Available from [www.freedominchrist.net](http://www.freedominchrist.net) [accessed 28 April 2000], located under caption BIBLICAL STUDIES.